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Letter dated 6 February 2018 from the Permanent Representative of the Russian Federation to the United Nations addressed to the Secretary-General

I have the honour to enclose herewith a copy of an analytical document entitled "Consolidated assessment of future terrorist threats", prepared by the Meeting of Heads of Special Services, Security Agencies and Law-Enforcement Organizations (see annex).

I should be grateful if you would circulate the present letter and its annex as a document of the General Assembly, under agenda item 109, and of the Security Council.

(*Signed*) Vassily **Nebenzia**

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Annex to the letter dated 6 February 2018 from the Permanent Representative of the Russian Federation to the United Nations addressed to the Secretary-General

[Original: Russian]

Meeting of Heads of Special Services, Security Agencies and Law-Enforcement Organizations

Consolidated assessment of future terrorist threats

(4–5 October 2017, Krasnodar)

Considerable action is being taken by the international community to combat terrorism. However, its manifestations continue to grow, affecting regions beset by military and political instability and entirely prosperous States alike. Against this backdrop, terrorism has become a threat to the interests of virtually every country in the world.

International terrorist organizations have maintained ideological, financial and material support for their activities, and their fighters are able to travel beyond individual States or entire regions.

Given this, it is particularly important to assess the situation in the most troubled regions, identify trends characterizing the activities of specific international terrorist organizations and, on that basis, establish a common approach for the international community to counter the most pressing terrorist threats.

1. Activities of international terrorist organizations in the Middle East

Intensive activity in Syria and Iraq involving the international terrorist organization Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), Jabhat Fath al-Sham (the Nusrah Front prior to July 2016) and other terrorist groups remains a threat with significant security implications in different regions of the world.

The combat capacity of ISIL has been significantly undermined as a result of increased efforts by the international community to combat terrorism in the Middle East, including the liberation of territories previously under ISIL control.

The group's leaders have been forced to reduce monthly payments to fighters and to wind up most of the "social" and infrastructural projects being carried out within the territories under their control. These had previously enabled ISIL to present itself as a quasi-State entity.

In the context of the diminished popularity of ISIL, a considerable decline has been noted in the number of its members operating in Syria and Iraq (taking into account both combat casualties and increased desertions). There has also been a drop in those joining the group's ranks from abroad.

Air strikes, carried out by the Russian and Syrian air forces against the positions and infrastructure of ISIL and the international terrorist organizations collaborating with it, have facilitated the transition by the Armed Forces of the Syrian Arab Republic to offensive operations and have expanded the territory under the control of government troops.

Offensive operations by government troops, with support from international coalition forces as well as Russia and Iran, have led to several major defeats for ISIL and the recapture of Syrian territory from the group. ISIL escape routes to areas bordering Turkey have been partially blocked and smuggling routes, used for the

transit of oil and arms and the movement of foreign terrorist fighters, have been dismantled. This has significantly reduced the terrorist group's revenue.

The counter-terrorist operation in Syria has caused some foreign terrorist fighters to attempt to return to their countries of origin. This has presented ISIL leaders with an opportunity to expand their geographical influence and to increase recruitment activities. Returnees, who have practical experience with mines and explosives, join autonomous operational cells of ISIL and are willing to carry out their leaders' objectives by committing terrorist attacks or other actions aimed at destabilizing the situation in their countries of origin.

A string of military defeats, and regular air strikes by the Russian and international coalition air forces, have caused international terrorist organizations to change their military tactics:

Rather than concentrating fighters and resources in open terrain or along supply lines, they have increasingly spread them out;

Troops and equipment are being moved only at night;

Concealment measures are being widely employed, which considerably impedes reconnaissance of their positions;

By using heavy weaponry only when absolutely necessary, despite being in possession of armoured equipment, they have favoured mobility, which allows their forces to mobilize as quickly and covertly as possible at areas of planned attacks;

Coercive mobilization of the population is increasingly being used in areas still under their control;

In some parts of Syria the non-Sunni population is being forced from frontline areas to prevent the formation of guerrilla groups;

Lower-level fighters, who were previously involved in active outreach on social networks, have been forbidden to use the Internet and mobile phones or to film military operations.

The offensive operations carried out by government troops have helped to cut off the main channels providing resources to international terrorist organizations in eastern Ghutah and to regain control over important military infrastructure in the Damascus area.

The ceasefire established in Syria and the partial withdrawal of the Russian air force have facilitated the transition to a political and diplomatic solution to the armed conflict. Following negotiations, the main principles of a political settlement of the crisis in the Syrian Arab Republic, which should lay the foundation of the future State structure, were presented to the parties for their consideration.

However, the political and military situation in the Syrian Arab Republic will remain challenging in the long term and may worsen. It will be strongly influenced by the activities of ISIL, Jabhat Fath al-Sham and other armed groups.

Fighters should be expected to attempt to prevent Syrian armed forces from advancing into the main terrorist strongholds — the territories used for the provision of material, financial and logistical support.

It is also likely that fighters will seek to boost their morale by increasing information and outreach activities that highlight ISIL military successes and demonstrate the combat strength of the group's brigades. Recruitment efforts will also be stepped up to attract new supporters.

At the same time, a tactical switch from direct confrontation to guerrilla warfare is likely. Given the adverse situation currently facing this international terrorist organization, doing so would enable it to save military and human resources while still inflicting significant damage and demonstrating its continued strength.

Other relatively new aspects of ISIL activity may include:

A return to organizing uncoordinated and local terrorist attacks involving the use of improvised explosive devices, unmanned airborne vehicles, car bombs and suicide bombers;

The use of radiological, chemical and biological agents;

The involvement of children and adolescents in the commission of terrorist attacks and in the execution of hostages.

Increased offensive operations by government and international coalition forces could lead to a greater flow of fighters from international terrorist organizations to neighbouring Arab States and European countries.

It should be expected that the leaders of international terrorist organizations will step up their activities aimed at redeploying fighters to certain countries, in the guise of refugees, displaced persons or migrant workers, using forged documents of European countries and countries of the Central Asian region. The most likely transit countries are Azerbaijan, Georgia, Ukraine, Moldova, Belarus and the countries of the Asia-Pacific and Central Asian regions. Once legal status is secured, fighters will seek to establish "sleeper cells" for their outreach and recruitment activities, and also for the commission of subversive terrorist acts.

2. Activities of international terrorist organizations in Africa

The counter-terrorism situation is becoming increasingly complex in almost all countries of the Maghreb and the Horn of Africa. International terrorism organizations in North Africa have stepped up their activity, the most active being the Muslim Brotherhood, Al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb, Al Mourabitoun (Algeria), Ansar Eddine (Mali), Ansar al-Sharia (Tunisia/Libya), Boko Haram (Nigeria), Al-Shabaab (Somalia), ISIL/Sinai Province (Egypt), Army of Islam (Libya) and Ansar al-Dawlah al-Islamiyah fi Ard al-Maghrib al-Aqsa (Morocco).

Libya remains a hotbed of terrorist activity that continues to have a negative impact on the entire region. Despite heavy losses in the battles for Sirte and Benghazi, and over oil-related facilities in the oil crescent region, ISIL supporters still have significant manpower and military capabilities at their disposal. The most operationally capable ISIL units were expeditiously withdrawn from the areas of fighting and redeployed to safer parts of the country where the terrorists, relying on sleeper cells, have begun to set up new strongholds.

It should therefore not be ruled out that, once its forces have regrouped, ISIL will increase the intensity of its offensive operations in Libya with a view to regaining control over the territories lost.

ISIL-affiliated groups based in Libya have not abandoned attempts to shift the focus of their terrorist operations towards Algeria and Tunisia.

Terrorist groups have retained significant military capabilities in the central and eastern parts of Algeria, where units of Al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb and Jund al-Khilafah have strongholds from which to carry out attacks on soldiers, the police and foreign nationals. The national security services regularly receive reports about planned terrorist attacks against facilities in the capital or attacks against personnel

from the security, defence and law enforcement agencies. There is a risk of attacks against oil, gas and energy sector infrastructure in the south of Algeria.

A high level of terrorist activity continues in Egypt. Despite the counter-terrorism operations conducted by the country's security institutions, the terrorist organization ISIL/Sinai Province still has enormous destructive potential. The tactics employed by the group have changed considerably as foreign fighters have joined its ranks. The group is carrying out reprisals against civilians unwilling to provide it with support, a practice typical of Islamic State.

The situation remains tense in Tunisia. This is largely due to the fact that Tunisians have begun returning from "hot spots": their total number in Syria and Iraq alone is estimated to be some 6,000 persons. Their potential integration into the local terrorist groups Okba Ibn Nafaa Brigade and Ansar al-Sharia or the possibility of them forming new sleeper cells will inevitably lead to enhanced military capabilities and increased activity by the terrorist underground in the country.

Despite the counter-terrorism operations being conducted in Mali, local terrorist underground activity — in the form of ISIL and Al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb-affiliated terrorist groups Al Mourabitoun and Ansar Eddine — has not diminished. Al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb operatives and their affiliates are still carrying out terrorist attacks in the country, opposing the security forces of Nigeria and Burkina Faso, and taking advantage of local contacts and ties with criminal groups. They coordinate their activities with terrorists in Libya, who assist them in recruiting volunteers and provide logistical support.

An alarming event occurred at the start of March 2017, when terrorist organizations operating in the Sahel region — Ansar Eddine, Al-Qaida in the Islamic Maghreb, Al Mourabitoun and Front de libération du Macina — formed a new coalition: the Group for the Support of Islam and Muslims (Zalaqa). Given the recent increase in ISIL supporters in the region, it cannot be ruled out that this terrorist alliance will attempt to expand its activities with a view to claiming leadership in the region.

A rising trend is the nexus between terrorist groups operating in Africa and transnational organized crime. The main sources of their funds are proceeds derived from trafficking in drugs, smuggling, trafficking in weapons, illegal migration and hostage-taking.

At the same time, contacts are being established between North African cells of ISIL and local Al-Qaida affiliates, leading to the coordination of their activities in Libya and Algeria.

The Nigerian-based terrorist organization Boko Haram, promoted by its leaders as "Islamic State's West African Province", has powerful terrorist capabilities. Its fighters regularly attack cities and military bases in north-eastern Nigeria and engage in mass hostage-taking. The terrorists have used car bombs and suicide bombers to carry out a series of terrorist attacks in densely populated areas.

Like Libya, Yemen is a likely logistical base for ISIL in the region, following the military setbacks in Syria and Iraq. This is being facilitated by the unstable political situation in the country and an increase in Shiite activity.

3. Activities of terrorist organizations in Afghanistan and Pakistan, and new emerging threats in the Central Asian region

The main destabilizing factor in the region remains highly active members of various regional and international terrorist organizations in northern areas of Afghanistan that border States members of the Commonwealth of Independent States.

This may result in the infiltration of their territory by radical Islamist groups or individuals.

The greatest threat to Central Asian States within the Commonwealth of Independent States continues to come from groups designated as terrorist by a number of States within the Commonwealth. Such groups include ISIL (specifically its regional branch, Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant-Khorasan Province), the Taliban movement, Islamic Jihad Union, Jamaat Ansarullah and Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan. There is reason to believe that Afghanistan and Pakistan will remain proving grounds for many regional extremist and international terrorist organizations in the future. They will also be incubation centres for new terrorist organizations whose activities will largely target countries in the Central Asian region.

Various groups have significantly stepped up guerrilla warfare and strengthened their positions in areas of Afghanistan that border the Central Asian region. Armed incidents have increased at the Afghan-Turkmen and Afghan-Tajik borders. Massive scale attacks are being carried out in the provinces of Faryab, Badakhshan, Kunduz, Sari Pul, Jowzjan, Baghlan, Takhar and Balkh by the Taliban, with the support of groups established by nationals from countries in the Central Asian region, including members of Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, as well as combat groups of ethnic Uzbeks, Tajiks and Turkmen inhabiting northern Afghanistan. In a number of regions in the north of Afghanistan terrorists have set up training camps and centres for training suicide bombers. The epicentre of militia activity in Afghanistan is switching from the south to the north of the country.

In view of its losses in Syria and Iraq, ISIL has been forced to seek ways to set up new strongholds of the "caliphate". The rise of ISIL in northern Afghanistan may pose the main threat to regional security in the near future. Given the current presence of ISIL in Afghanistan and the coordinated actions of terrorist groups in the north and east of the country, there are real prospects of a new "terrorist front" opening up in Central Asia. Some of the militant groups planning to transfer their operations from Afghanistan and Pakistan to Uzbekistan and Tajikistan have relocated to northern Afghanistan. Activity by Islamic Jihad Union, Jamaat Ansarullah, Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan and the Imam al-Bukhari Battalion has been noted in northern Afghanistan.

In order to maintain their financial and resource capabilities, some of these terrorist entities and a number of Afghan Taliban leaders have declared their support for ISIL. Regional terrorist groups with a large proportion of nationals from Central Asian countries have pledged their allegiance to ISIL.

In Afghanistan ISIL is employing the tactics that it used previously in Syria and Iraq: fighters first clandestinely arrive in a region and then declare the territory captured, with particular cruelty shown towards the local population by the terrorists.

Significant ISIL forces of Arab, Pashtun and Central Asian origin have been redeployed from Syria to Afghanistan and Pakistan over the past year. The massive relocation of experienced ISIL fighters that has been predicted to take place shortly from Syria and Iraq to Afghanistan could considerably strengthen their regional combat capability and increase the threats to States in the Central Asian region.

The northern region of Afghanistan bordering on Turkmenistan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan has been transformed by regional and international terrorist groups into a bridgehead for terrorist expansion from Afghanistan and Pakistan into the Central Asian region. Given that at least 4,000 ISIL fighters are currently deployed on the border between Afghanistan and Tajikistan, with up to 3,000 on the border with Turkmenistan, the Turkmen section of the border poses an increasing threat. This makes the scenario of repelling possible expansion by international terrorist

organizations significantly more complex as it carries the risks of the terrorists infiltrating States members of the Commonwealth of Independent States in the Caspian region, namely Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan and Russia.

Radicalization of the population and the creation of a social support base for international terrorist organizations have been noted in States of the Central Asian region. The ISIL leadership, in particular, is doing extensive preparatory work to destabilize the situation in the Central Asian region by sending its recruiters there as well as mobile combat squads, mostly comprising Central Asian nationals. The leaders of a number of ethnic-based regional extremist organizations operating in States members of the Commonwealth of Independent States have strong ideological ties with international terrorist organizations.

4. Emerging terrorist threats in States supporting the fight against the international terrorist organization ISIL

In view of the international community's intensive counter-terrorist efforts in Syria, the threat from ISIL is projected to spread beyond Iraq and the Syrian Arab Republic. This process can already be observed, in view of the increased threats in several regions of the world.

The Russian Federation, Europe, the Middle East, Afghanistan and Pakistan, the Central Asian region, North, East and West Africa, and Southeast Asia are expected to experience an increased level of terrorist threat over the medium term.

In order to expand its terrorist operations and establish new footholds outside Syria, ISIL has established specialized units entrusted with setting up, training and deploying groups of saboteurs and terrorists. To organize terrorist attacks directly, ISIL is focused on establishing sleeper cells and on the training and redeployment of foreign terrorist fighters and Russian and Central Asian nationals with previous combat experience.

ISIL considers the Russian Federation to be a priority target for terrorist attacks.

ISIL terrorists are retaliating with violent acts of intimidation in response to the considerable losses sustained by the international terrorist organization following the inclusion of Russia in counter-terrorism operations in Syria, and increased pressure from the international counter-terrorism coalition in the Middle East and other world regions. The level of vulnerability to terrorism, primarily in the countries most actively engaged in combating terrorism, has thereby increased. The terrorists are targeting not only the Russian Federation, but also States members of the Commonwealth that have expressed their support for it.

A steady increase in the level of terrorist threats in European Union member States has been demonstrated by high-profile attacks in such countries as France, Belgium, Germany, the United Kingdom and Sweden. These indicate changes to the tactics employed by the terrorists, who are increasingly focused on carrying out strong offensives beyond their traditional regions in the Middle East and North Africa. The situation in Europe is exacerbated by the refugee influx from crisis regions, in which radical Islamists are infiltrating the European Union, and by the return home of foreign terrorist fighters with their wives and children.

A serious situation is developing in South-East Asian countries, where a growing number of terrorist manifestations have also been observed. This primarily concerns the Philippines, which is being targeted by ISIL leaders seeking to establish an extensive terrorist network in that country. Many armed groups currently in the south of the Philippines have already sworn allegiance to ISIL. There are indications that close contacts are being established between local ISIL supporters and the terrorist organization's leadership in the Middle East. ISIL cells in Malaysia,

Indonesia and the Philippines are directly managed and financially supported by the Katibah Nusantara special battalion within ISIL, which operates in Syria and Iraq and is made up of fighters from Southeast Asian countries.

It may be concluded from an analysis of the situation in countries where international terrorist organizations are most active, and of terrorist activity by jihadist groups elsewhere, that the main terrorist threats to most members of the international community continue to be associated with ISIL.

ISIL is actively engaged in public radicalization efforts in a number of countries, it is expanding its propaganda and recruitment campaigns, including through the use of the Internet, and the leadership's strategic plans are being implemented to seek out new regional alliances and establish a global Suni "caliphate". These activities are leading to the creation of new terrorist breeding grounds and are destabilizing the situation in many countries in the Middle East, in North, West and East Africa, and in Central, South and Southeast Asia. They are also strengthening the terrorist underground in European countries.

From an analysis of the situation in the operational areas of terrorist organizations and the nature of their activities, including the trends outlined above, the following factors may be seen as contributing to the continued existence or emergence of new terrorist threats:

1. *Foreign terrorist fighters returning to their countries of origin from regions with elevated terrorist activity*

Battle-hardened returnees with expertise in secret communications and guerrilla warfare are forming armed gangs that are ready to carry out orders to commit terrorist attacks. Furthermore, upon returning to their home countries, many fighters of international terrorist organizations are actively engaged in outreach that directs supporters of radical interpretations of Islam to carry out terrorist activities independently, i.e., "individual jihad" tactics.

2. *Improvement in the level of terrorist training regarding the use of information and communication technologies, including the Internet, for terrorist purposes*

International terrorist organizations used to adapt training to take into account the national and religious particularities of the target audience in specific regions. There is currently a decline in outreach and recruitment by international terrorist organizations using modern information technologies, especially among young people.

The situation is complicated by the increased number of lone wolves who have become self-radicalized from exposure to international terrorist propaganda in the media landscape. It is extremely difficult for law enforcement agencies to identify such individuals and to thwart their plans.

International terrorist organizations have been making broad use of cyberspace to spread radical ideology, recruit new supporters, attract additional sources of funding, collect information on potential targets and organize secret communications and hacker attacks. These activities have reached a high level of technological sophistication. The quantity and quality of propaganda materials have improved. They are being disseminated via popular Internet services, social networks and mobile telephony platforms (messengers).

3. *The spread of jihadist ideology*

In many countries emissaries of international terrorist organizations, both directly and through the Internet, are seeking to recruit individuals who would be willing to carry out terrorist attacks from among local residents and migrants. Radical

preachers have broad modalities for working with neophytes. Newly-converted young Muslims are often the staunchest followers of radical ideology and more likely to fall victim to terrorist recruiters. Local extremists who are inspired by the propaganda of international terrorist organizations and are under their influence, but who have not travelled abroad or maintained contacts with members of such organizations, as a rule, attract less attention from the law enforcement authorities.

The threat of radicalization of the public, particularly of the younger generation, will remain a pressing issue in the near term owing to the ideological propaganda of international terrorist recruiters and the broad dissemination of extremist narratives on the Internet. Rapid radicalization of the population is occurring both in countries of the Islamic world and in Muslim countries in the West. The powerful ideological and propaganda campaign being conducted by international terrorist and religious extremist organizations is the main catalyst for the radicalization of Muslims.

4. *The growing trend of terrorist organizations using lone wolves*

In the near term radical groups, primarily ISIL, will attempt to use their own capabilities or lone wolves from among their supporters (soft power) to carry out high-profile terrorist attacks in States supporting the anti-ISIL campaign. For maximum publicity these will take the form of spontaneous and synchronized attacks on vulnerable sites and densely populated areas, an effective tactic employed in the past. Terrorists are continuing to design innovative techniques that enable them to bypass security systems at transport hubs, shopping malls, recreational facilities and other densely populated areas. Attacks could be organized by a variety of means, from the remote detonation of improvised explosive devices and the deployment of suicide bombers to the use of knives, weapons and biological and chemical agents, as well as vehicles. For maximum psychological impact, the terrorists will choose to attack soft targets with large crowds, where they could inflict the heaviest casualties with minimal losses, spark panic and increase confrontation between the public and the authorities.

5. *Possible creation of terrorist alliances*

At the strategic level, the positions of the main terrorist organizations are far apart. However, there are indications of some moves towards tactical collaboration. At the regional level, collaboration is taking place between North African cells of ISIL and local groups of Al Qaida. This has resulted in the coordination of their activities in Libya and Algeria. Alliances have also been noted between ISIL and Taliban groups in northern Afghanistan.

The following trends outlined in the 2016 consolidated assessment remain relevant:

The ambition of international terrorist organizations to establish firm control over sizeable territories with a view to setting up quasi-State entities within the ideological framework of a "caliphate";

International terrorist organizations diversifying major sources of funding and seeking new opportunities to finance terrorist operations.